CHIPKO

This book is the fourth in a series of books for children on environment. This project and the idea for this story has been conceptualised by Anil Agarwal of the Centre for Science and Environment and aims to generate literature on nature-society interactions for children. It is based on an actual events in Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh in 1970s.

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CHIPKO !

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What do the forests give?

The deafening roar of the swirling angry waters echoed amidst the world's highest mountains. The waters of the river Alaknanda in the Himalayas were bursting forth in a flash flood. Bolts of lightning lit up the dark sky. Claps of thunder were followed by the rain which was relentless in its fury. Cloud burst and heavy rainfall made the bare mountains slide down. The river seemed to be on fire as sparks rose when huge rocks thrown far and wide collided with each other. Streams became gushing, forceful waterfalls that fell down the dizzying heights of mountains. The waters brought with them tonnes of mud, stones and boulders that rained down the denuded slopes. Mountain streams joined up with larger streams and the latter in turn fed their swollen water torrents into the main river in the valley. Unimaginable quantities of debris blocked confluence of streams, creating a huge artificial lake of water that was held by the abnormal dams of rock and boulders. Swirling torrents crashed against these walls and the waters overflowed these stone walls sweeping through the valley with shattering force. They moved with lightning speed and the high waves exploded whatever lay in their paths. The mighty deodars swayed before they crashed on being uprooted.

The roaring waters swallowed trees, homes, bridges, buses, animals and people, leaving behind a trail of destruction. Cries from drowning people and animals could not be heard above the thundering of the flood waters. Terraced fields were wiped out, their crops and plants vanishing below the waters.

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August 1970

Ganga Ram was trying very hard to walk up the rugged slopes of the mountains. He could barely make out the well known paths he had used since he was a young boy. The terrible floods two weeks ago had wiped them away. The dry needle like pine leaves formed a prickly and a slippery carpet on the earth. Ganga Ram's twelve year old son Lala Ram was with him. The boy was busy collecting fallen twigs and broken wood from the ground and putting them in a large *bori*. The wind and rain had scattered them on the slopes. With heavy steps and heavy hearts, father and son completed the steep climb. It took a lot of effort for they were weary and sad. They were returning from Belakuchi, a small wayside hamlet that was no more. The flood waters had swept away this area with all its homes and people.

Ganga Ram recalled that he had stood on an empty piece of soggy, squashy land in Belakuchi. This had once been his daughter's married home. Parvati had got married in the spring of the previous year. Four generations had lived in Parvati's happy home. From great-grandfather to Parvati's baby daughter - all of them had been drowned in the cloudburst, rain and flood. For the people of the valley the flood was like a nightmare. Very few in Belakuchi saw the next dawn.

It was well into the night when Ganga Ram and Lala entered their home. A small lamp burnt in the corner of the room. Lala's mother, Khimli Devi stirred, rose from her bed and said, "What news? I was getting worried. What did you see?" As there was no response she continued, "I'll make hot tea."

She knew from the look in her husband's eyes that the worst news they had heard in the last fortnight of July after the big rains was true. Silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Yes, tea is a good idea," replied Ganga Ram.

Tired, wet and hungry, Lala laid down the

sack in the corner of the room, and said, "Here is some fuel for tomorrow."

April 1973

Four young friends scampered up the hillside on small winding footpaths. The snows had melted and the breeze was cool and crisp. Birds were back with the spring. The slopes were covered with soft green ferns and a host of multicoloured wild flowers. New fresh grass pushed its way through crevices in rocks.

Ganga Ram's son Lala Ram, who was now nearly 15 years old and his friends Nandi, Bhaga and Gopal were up with the rising sun. It was their daily routine to climb up to the meadow that lay in the shadow of the tall trees high up on the hill. The agile kids skilfully collected herbs from here.

"Do you realize that in search of these small plants, we now have to walk higher up these hills?" asked Gopal.

Nandi was a tall and lanky girl with large bright eyes. Her bangles jingled when she plucked the herbs. She spoke wisely for her thirteen years, "I heard Bhattji at one of the Mandal meetings saying that with so many trees from our forests being cut by contractors from the plains, we will all have to walk further and higher in these hills to search for our fuel and herbs."

"By giving these herbs to our Mandal Office, our families earn more money. Bhattji is really helping us to find new markets for our herbs."

"Yes, remember that big fat man, moochawala, who used to come from the plains? He sure used to cheat us!"

"I like roaming these forests", said the soft-spoken Bhaga. She was older than Nandi but not so active. Bhaga was a dreamer who always lagged behind the others. My *nani* tells us stories of how the forests have been vanishing since she was a girl. She worries too much and is always asking, "Where will we live? Where will we go when the forests disappear?"

Lala Ram came towards them, "Stop chatting, let's finish off soon. We still have to take these bags of plants to the Mandal office and get ready for school in the afternoon."

"Oh, I have not done my homework as yet. Yes, let's move," responded Gopal.

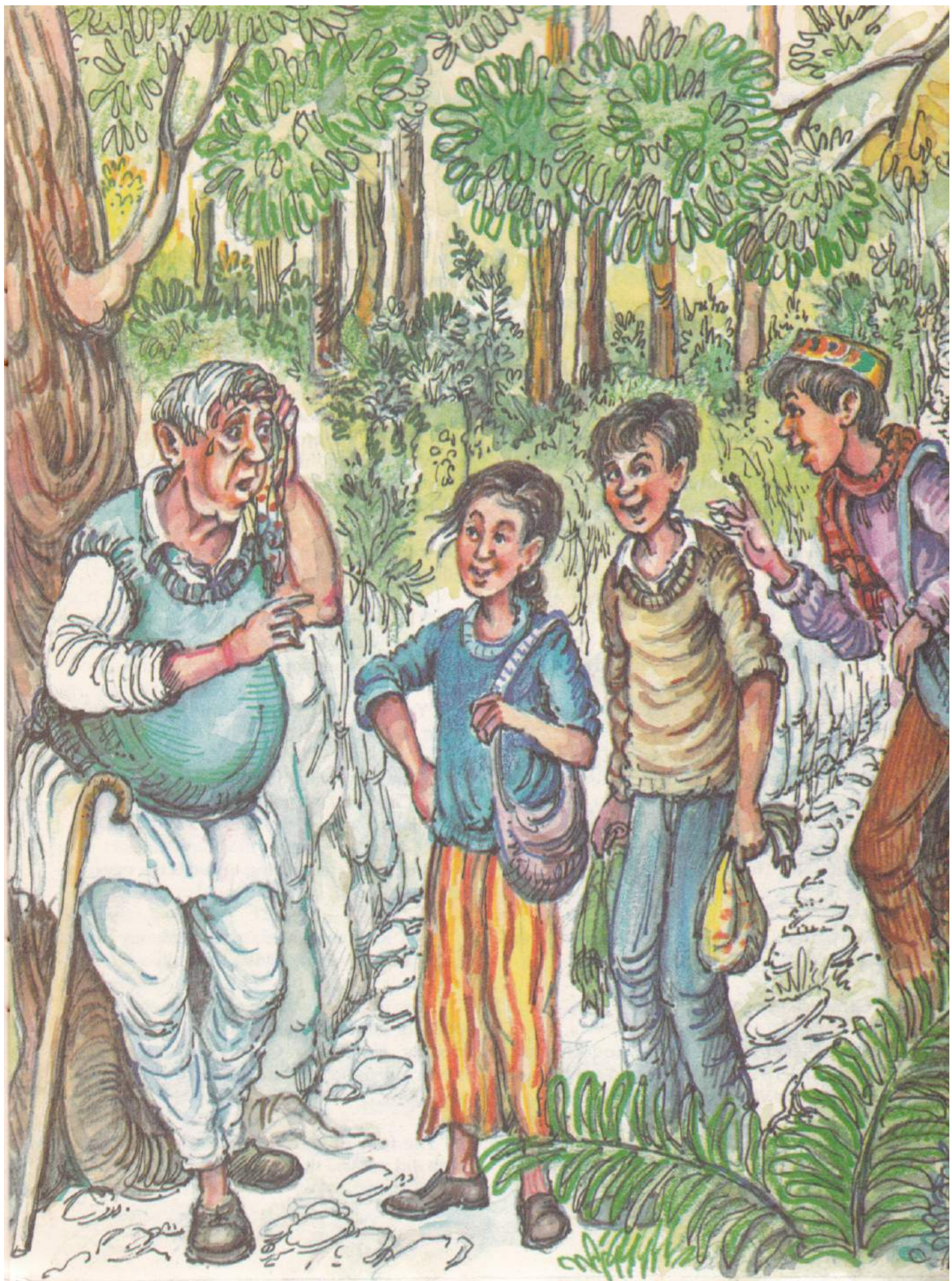
With great care they packed the pile of small plants in cloth bags. With *jholas* slung from their shoulders, the four of them started their walk downhill through the tall *deodars*. Some of these stately trees had been axed creating spaces in the forest. "Even up here, the axe man has cleverly cut these beautiful trees. He leaves two or three trees and cuts one !" said Nandi.

Lala replied, "Last year I saw these trees being rolled down the hill-side to the river's edge."

"Everyone says, the waters carry the logs to the factories," added Gopal. The children had seen and heard so much growing up in these surroundings. In fact, in the last few years so much more had happened.

The children and their parents were active members of the village *mandal*. Bhattji, their leader, with his towering personality, had really created a wonderful cooperative community amongst the hill people. They worked together for creating awareness of their environment and garnering income from their forests.

Turning the corner they saw a large man approaching them. He was huffing and puffing on his way up the narrow path.

"Where are you kids coming from?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Kyon bhai sahib? Where do you want to go?"

"No - nothing, I mean nowhere special. I was told I'll find kids like you collecting herbs in these mountains."

"So? Then...?" asked Nandi.

"Yes. We are the kids and we collect herbs," replied Lala.

"Oh good. I'm glad I've met you all," said the outsider.

Still very breathless he leaned his big body on a tree. "This will save me from climbing higher. I am here to buy herbs. I can give you good money for all your collections today."

"No," shouted Gopal.

"Where have you come from?" questioned Bhaga.

"How much ?" said Nandi cheekily.

"Don't encourage him !" exclaimed Lala.

"Ten rupees for each of you. That should make you happy as you can keep it for yourselves."

"We don't take *rishvat* like you fellows," said Lala Ram. "No. Thank you. We know where to give the herbs."

"Why don't you climb higher and collect them yourself?" giggled Nandi.

"Come on, lets go"

"Wait !" said the big man. "You kids had better talk nicely. We can be good contractors for you and give you good money too. I'll...."

"What will you do?" interrupted Lala. The young boy held his head high and stretched his lanky body to look taller. Looking closer at his face he said, "I'm sure you are the same man who used to come here few years ago and cheat us. Of course! He's shaven off his *mooch !*

"We are not going to be fooled again."

"HE IS THE SAME MAN !" the children shouted together.

Expecting to be chased, the children ran downhill with great speed. They heard the man swearing after them. The wind carried his loud voice for some distance.

Leaving the green forest area behind, they reached a barren hillside that had only stumps of trees. Their run made them breathless. Slowing down their pace they stopped and sat on the stumps. These served as seats on which they could rest awhile. The kids could see their village just below them.

"There seems to be a lot of noise coming from the village," said Bhaga, breathlessly, putting down her *jhola*.

"Yes. I can also see so many people moving about," added Nandi.

"Something must have happened" said Lala Ram. "Can't you see everyone is coming out of the village."

"Yes, they are walking towards the opposite hill."

Lala Ram continued, "And look, my father is ahead of the whole lot with Bhattji."

"Yes, even the women are in the crowd. Our mothers must be there," added Bhaga. "How exciting, *bhai* !" said Gopal. "Let's go straight there. No use going home or to the Mandal office now."

The four of them raced down the slopes. They did not use the main path. That was much

too long. They had to keep balancing themselves while running downhill, even though they were as swift and sure footed as the mountain sheep and goats.

The people of Gopeshwar were walking towards the hill with long purposeful strides. It was really an amazing sight to see. A long column of humanity marching, as if to war. And, war it was !

When the children came near, they ran towards their elders. The two boys made a beeline for the front to join their fathers. The girls trying to locate their mothers shouted out *"Ma, ma, kahan ho?"*

From the crowd Khimli Devi, Hira Devi and Devki stopped and waved to Nandi and Bhaga, who joined them.

"Ma, what's happening?" Nandi asked Devki.

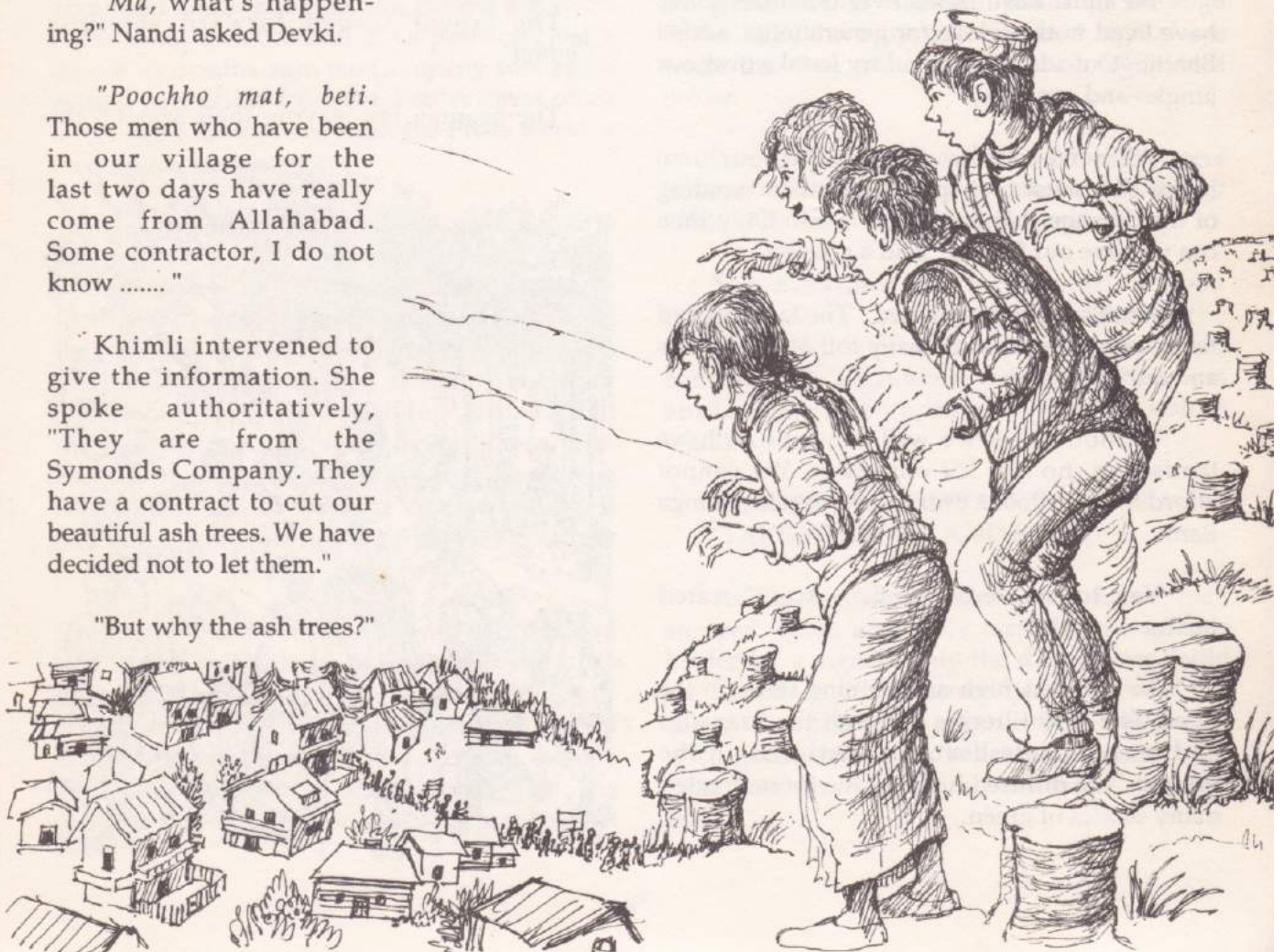
"Poochho mat, beti. Those men who have been in our village for the last two days have really come from Allahabad. Some contractor, I do not know .... "

Khimli intervened to give the information. She spoke authoritatively, "They are from the Symonds Company. They have a contract to cut our beautiful ash trees. We have decided not to let them."

"But why the ash trees?"

"Arre beti, from the days of my *nani's nani sarkari* people, factory people and their contractors have been coming for our wood. Their greed and want is never ending. I believe Symonds Company makes cricket bats in their factory at Allahabad."

"Mausi, you are right. Bhattji was mentioning in the last Mandal meeting, that bats and racquets for games like cricket and tennis are made of wood found in our forests," added Nandi.

"Ok, Ok," replied her mother. "Here the village people asked for a few trees for making our ploughs and beams for our houses and we were refused. We were even willing to pay the forest *dafter.* They know ash tree wood is light and strong, not like pine trees, and will fetch a better price from factory contractors."

"So now, all of us have decided at the meeting we had just now at the Mandal office, that we are going to hug our trees. I'll see how these ruthless city people will axe us down along with our trees," spoke Hira Devi. "That's why we are marching to the ash tree wood."

"Fantastic !" said Bhaga. Her face brightened up and her eyes sparkled.

Nandi clapped her hands. The two girls made their way through all the people, right to the front and stepped in line with Lala and Gopal. The boys were walking behind the leaders, hanging on to every word their elders said.

A wise Ganga Ram was saying, "If we guard our forests, we can safeguard ourselves and our country."

"We must have rights over our forests. We have lived in these hills for generations," added Bhattji. "Outsiders come and try to take over our jungles and our lives."

"We need to take matters into our own hands. We must first spread the understanding of the damage that has been caused. Only then can we save our forests," said a villager.

Nandi's father mentioned, "The last two and half years have taken a heavy toll of our homes and our lives."

"Without trees we will continue to have landslides, no soil for our crops. We cannot afford to have floods every year," replied Ganga Ram.

"Yes, today we can make a start," stated Bhattji.

The sun was high and shining through the trees. The rays filtering through the branches and leaves made beautiful patterns on the ground. The diffused light in the forest created many shades of green.

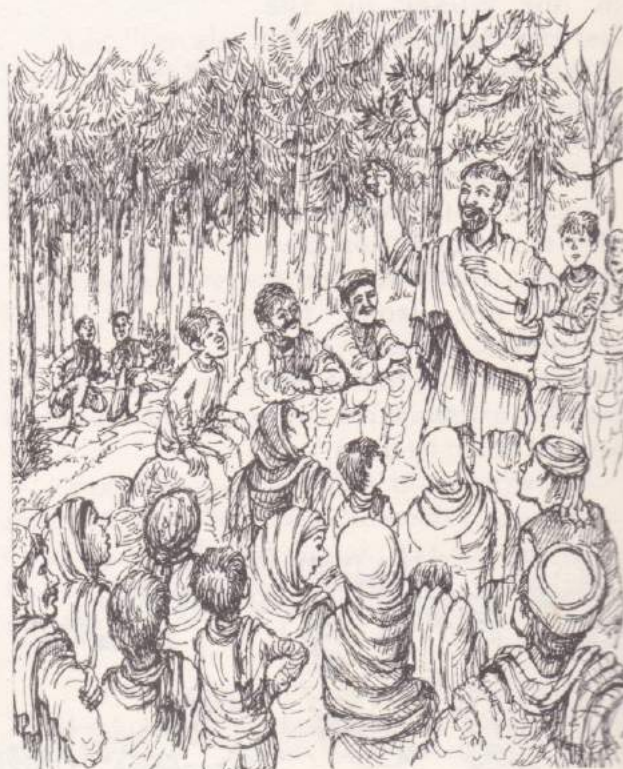
The noisy, vocal group of people entered the beautiful glade.

They startled the six men sitting there who were smoking their *bidees*. Their axes were lying beside them.

A short distance away, Bhattji turned around. He raised his arms and gestured to his people to stop.

"*Sathiyon*. We all had long discussions in the village. Now is the time to act on our decisions. As you all know, we are the people who belong here. Our lives, our music and song, our joys and sorrows are intertwined with the trees, ferns and herbs of these forests. Today we'll make a new beginning to save the most precious gifts of nature that we have. Let not the axe fall on our beautiful trees. Let us hug them. Each one of you, now '*chipko*' a tree."

The crowd surged forward shouting "*Chipko!*"

The axemen ran leaving their axes on the

ground. The people of Gopeshwar had won the first round without even clinging to the trees. Just the idea was the winner of the day.

Two months later, the crisp mountain air was charged with urgency. Lala Ram, Gopal, Nandi and Bhaga were collecting and cleaning the instruments for their band. The drums, long fluted pipes and cymbals were being got ready. The four friends were excited and worked with great determination. With the help of their friends they also made huge banners. Strong words were made into slogans and painted onto large sheets of paper and cloth. There was no time to lose. They were going to lead the procession to Rampur Phata with their band and banners.

The people of Gopeshwar were dismayed and furious when they heard that the Symonds Company from the plains had cleverly organized another contract for cutting ash trees. After being unsuccessful at Gopeshwar, just a couple of months ago, the Company was again getting permission from the district forest office to cut these lovely trees from the Phata forest, a mere 60 kilometres away.

The word spread in a flash, faster than a forest fire but with the same fury and action. The young and old of these hills had come to realize that only when their forests are there, will they have food. They remembered when the Belakuchi hillside had slid into the river three years ago. The landslide and flood had ravaged their hills, villages and lives. The natural tradition of protection and conserving the forests took on a deeper understanding. It had come to mean the very survival of their homes and culture.

The people from Gopeshwar had decided that they would all go in a big procession to Phata and support their neighbours. The fight to save the trees and their environment had spread through the mountains and valleys to include all the hill communities of the entire region. The message that was on everyone's lips was to meet and *'Chipko'* in Phata.

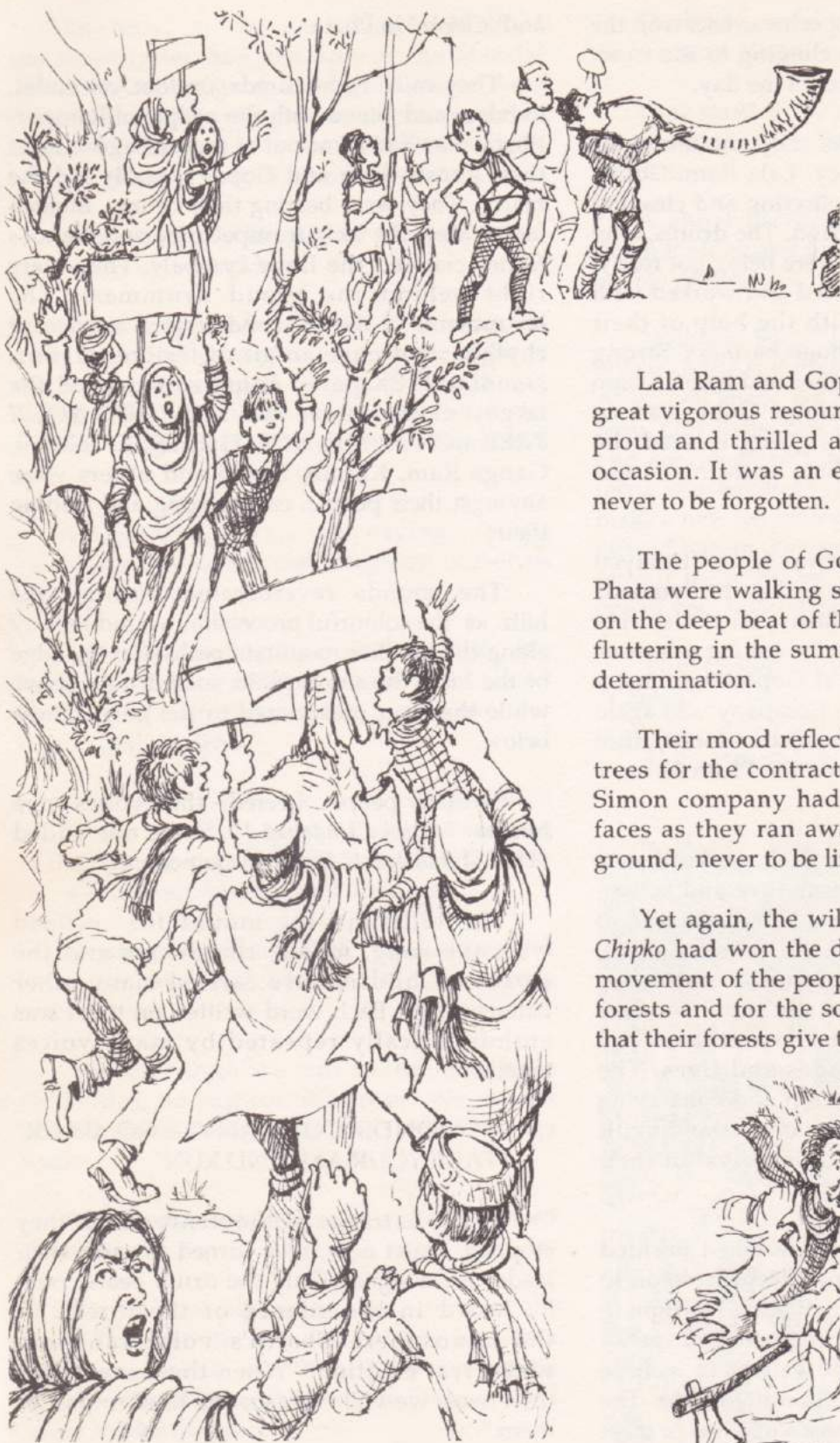
They came in hundreds, on foot, on mules, in buses and joined with the people of Rampur-Phata, who had come out of their village to meet their guests. Lala and Gopal proudly led the march. They were beating their drums. Bhaga's father blew the long trumpet pipe and Nandi's father clanged the large cymbals. They were right behind the proud drummers. The instruments of the hill-band created a resonant rhythm and gave an air of festive fervour. Nandi and Bhaga on either side carried the largest cloth banner that said "HUG YOUR TREE - CHOP ME, NOT THE TREE." Bhattji, Ganga Ram, Khimli, Devki and others were amongst their people, encouraging and leading them.

The sounds reverberated through the hills as the colourful procession wound its way along the familiar mountain paths. On the edge of the hills, the snow peaks soared high above while the river meandered in the gorge down below.

So many people cheered - their voices were hoarse. *"Chipko Jindabad !"* Some one added *"DGSM Jindabad !"* Everyone joined in.

The hills and the mountains echoed with the song, music, the drums and the slogans. Children also carried many other banners high. Each word written on them was enthusiastically repeated by many voices together.

"SYMONDS COMPANY - GO BACK"
"TAKE YOUR AXE AND RUN"

At the entrance of the dense forest they stopped. Quiet now, they turned towards their leader for a signal. Only the drum beats could be heard in the silence of the forest. In the atmosphere Bhattji's voice rang out with great emotion. "When these men raise their axes, we will embrace the trees to protect them."

The young and old; men, women and children moved in silent understanding. The axemen of the Symonds Company were startled when Bhattji again called out, "Kill us first, before you kill a single tree."

Lala Ram and Gopal beat their drums with great vigorous resounding sounds. They were proud and thrilled at being part of this rare occasion. It was an extraordinary experience never to be forgotten.

The people of Gopeshwar and Rampur - Phata were walking silently through the forest on the deep beat of their drums, their banners fluttering in the summer breeze, with serious determination.

Their mood reflected itself amongst the ash trees for the contractor and his men hired by Simon company had shock and fear on their faces as they ran away. Their axes fell to the ground, never to be lifted again.

Yet again, the will and the brilliant idea of *Chipko* had won the day. It also started a great movement of the people, by the people for their forests and for the soil, water and livelihoods that their forests give them.

Resistance at Reni

January 2, 1974

The grey mist lay heavily, hugging the earth like a blanket. It was so thick that you could not see beyond a couple of feet. A figure loomed up through the mist, a tall man, 5' 11" or so, wrapped in a brown shawl. Sparkling eyes below a crop of short hair lit up his gaunt face, as Chandi Prasad Bhatt took up his vigil at the main door of the Dehradun Town Hall.

When the doors opened at 9.30 am. for the auction of 2451 trees in the village of Reni, about 250 kilometres away, the tall man was ready. He stood at the top of the steps of this old British building, handing out pamphlets. And as they entered, the auctioneers laughed at him.

"Just look at this eccentric fool from the hills," said one.

"What does he think he can achieve standing outdoors in the freezing cold?" added another.

"Has a piece of paper ever stopped us ?"

"The government is with us, like this", said a plump man tightly clasping his hands together.

Chandi Prasad stonily ignored their taunts, focussing his attention instead on those who did stop out of interest to read the pamphlets and listen to him.

The posters stuck to the doors of the Town Hall fluttered in the chilly, cold wind. The words at the end of the poster were simple, yet strong, '*This is the smothered cry of those swept away in the Belakuchi flood, the cry of a people ravaged by the callous axing of forests*'.

By 11.30 the auction was over. The trees had fallen before the auctioneer's hammer. The price had been fixed at Rs. 4.71 lakhs. Quietly rewrapping his shawl around him, Chandi Prasad Bhatt entered the corridor and contacted the clerk of the successful contractor. He informed him that he would have to face resistance from those hill people who would not allow the trees to be felled.

The clerk scoffed at him. "Who can stand up against us?"

"The people of *Chipko*" was the simple reply.

Screams of raucous laughter followed the tall man as he walked out into the chilly light of day. He knew that to counter the greed and profit making motives of the contractors would not be easy. He also knew that till the snow thawed in March, nothing would happen.

"This man is really like a *daku*, he's dangerous. We will have to think of a plan to outwit him", the plump man said, and then added, "*Chalo*, let's go and have tea and *samosas* at Royal Restaurant, in Palton Bazaar."

March 14, 1974

The bus was packed with people, and even though the day outside was cold, the breath of so many people resulted in the windows getting misted over.

A woman, her head wrapped in an old shawl, sat on one of the seats, trying hard to restrain a squawking chicken that was attempting to escape. Next to her sat Chandi Prasad Bhatt, dressed in his customary Nehru jacket over a *kurta* and a pyjama.

"Off to the market today, *Maaji* ?" he greeted her.

"Yes, *bhula*, now we have no choice. Selling our produce in Joshimath has become the sole way of our earning a living. Our land is so poor, and the heavy rain this winter washed away what little soil we have."

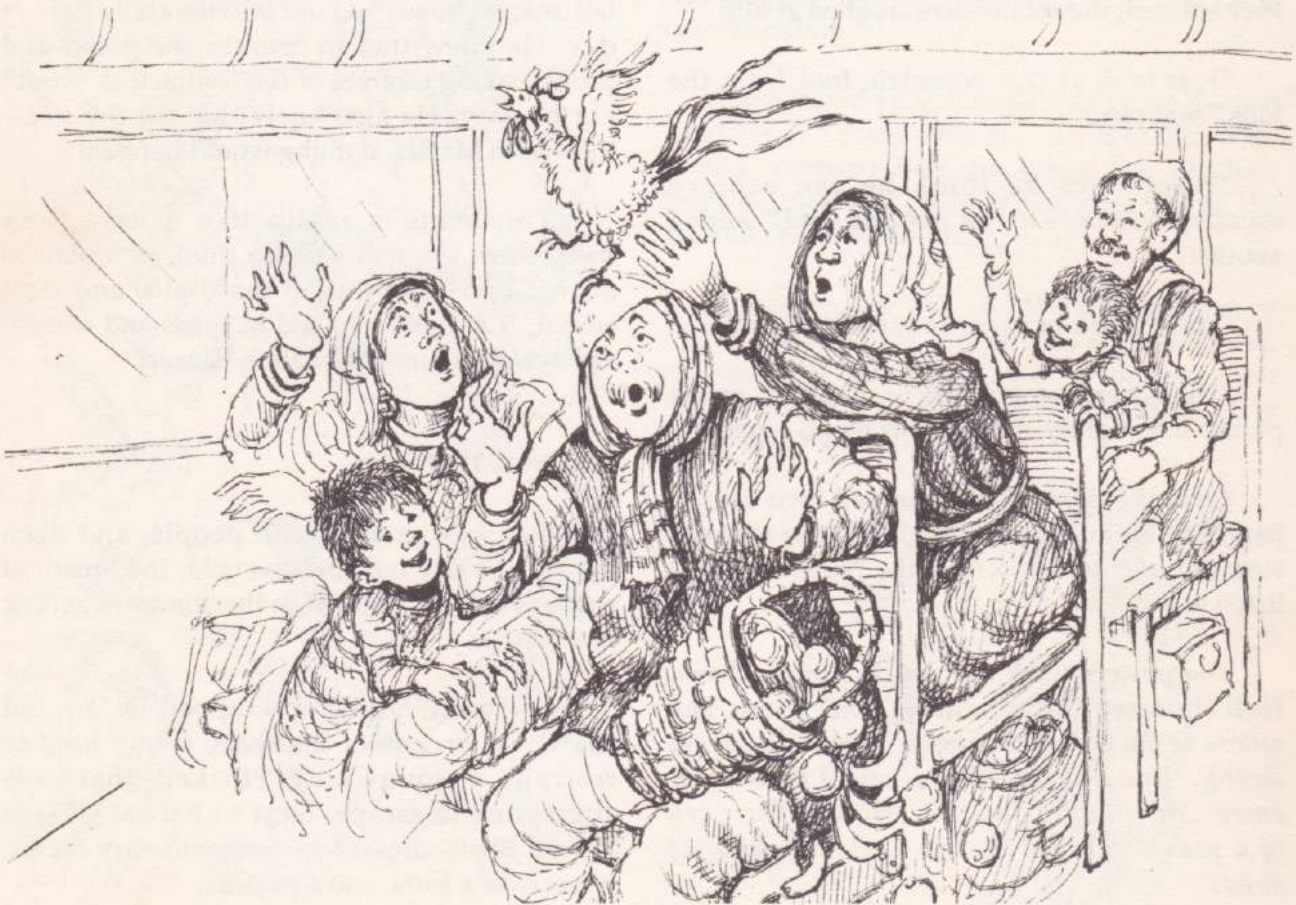
"Load the wood on properly," a shout came from outside. Small bundles of firewood were being tossed up to a *pahadi* on the roof who stacked them neatly in rows. Soon the top of the bus looked like a moving forest of dead twigs and branches.

"Think this is a bus or a tempo to move goods in?" the *sardar* driver asked, climbing into his seat, his angry tone negated by a broad smile.

"They're all for sale in Badrinath. There seem to be a lot of pilgrims this season." A man volunteered the information to all the passengers, but as there was no response he muttered to himself, "Yes, business is good."

"Just a minute, Gopalnathji is coming."

Good natured grins lit up everyone's faces when the name was mentioned. Gopalnathji was the local postman, who brought both good and bad news, but more importantly money-orders to the doorstep.

"Your bag must be full of money since it's the 14th today," a young boy called out as he hoisted him up the steep steps of the old bus. Mid-month was money-order time, a time when those working in the plains sent money to those at home. A time to buy and stock up till the next

money-order came, a time to rejoice.

A middle-aged woman dressed in black, got up to give her seat to the postman with his heavy bag. He was a VIP in these parts, a lifeline from those who had migrated to the plains to better their prospects.

"Chandi Prasadji, there you are. I was worried the bus had left," a young man named Rawat slipped into the seat behind Chandi Prasad. "There's news about the possible date from Hayat Singh," he whispered with urgency.

The postman pulled a bunch of letters out of his khaki cloth bag and handed them over to Rawat, who was very well known in this area. "Post for the DGSM".

The bus started with a lurch and a grinding of gears. A group of men from a nearby village rushed in at the last moment. Their tools suggested that they worked as resin tappers.

"Off to ruin our hills, are you?" said Rawat angrily. "Wait till the people from Bhyundar village come to know, they'll set you straight."

"We're just trying to make a living," said one of the men defensively.

"A living for you, and destruction for us," said an old woman with features that were distinctively Tibetan. "First the oaks went to the *angrezi sarkar* when I was a child, then the *deodars* went to make railway sleepers...... all we're left with is this foolish pine. It can't hold the soil or the water, just allows it all to run off. Don't you understand that?"

"Paapi pet ka sawaal hai," another of the resin tappers added.

While Rawat carried on the debate, Chandi Prasad Bhatt put the letters safely away in his *jhola* and leaned his head against the window, cleaning the mist with a rough, weathered hand. They were now driving far above the Rishi Ganga. The sound of the fast flowing water was almost as loud as the sound of the straining bus engine.

Chandi Prasad Bhatt looked down to the ash coloured beach that flanked the swift river. He remembered the time he had spent sawing logs when he was younger. These logs were then floated down the river to mills in the plains. How much of his childhood had been spent seeing logs float past on the broad body of this river, coming from god knows where, and going god knows where.

Now they turned a corner and a hillside full of neatly planted chir pines, came into view. Here and there lay a tree, snapped like a matchstick, the breaking point on its bark marked by an ugly gash that had been made to collect resin.

A screech of brakes and a shouted curse by the *sardar* driver brought the bus and the heated debate within it to a shuddering stop. The chicken flew out of the old woman's hands and sat on the head of a man in a woolen cap, clucking furiously.

Rawat slid the window open and peered out. A team of labourers were at work clearing the road of stones and rocks that had slipped down the mountain side to block all the traffic. The bus emptied, passengers helping to lift the heavy rocks and pile them against the crumbling earth.

Chandi Prasad looked at his watch, he still had time to reach Reni. He joined the other passengers in the wearisome task. Stone after stone moved from one hand to the other till the road was finally clear.

The bus squeezed past the pile of rocks, moving dangerously close to the edge. Chandi Prasad sat back in his seat, mopping his brow, wondering if the meeting planned at Reni

would help stop the contractors' axe, which would in turn stop this chain of young mountains from crumbling away.

....

Chandi Prasad Bhatt made his way up the mountain path to the village of Reni. Two girls greeted him, filling their *ghadas* from the steady drip of a trickling mountain stream. Up above were boulders half embedded in the soil, half out, waiting for the next shower to send them crashing into the ravine below.

Reni was a village of *botiyas*, traditional traders who had once spent their summer crossing over to Tibet to exchange *mandua* and barley for salt and butter, wool and gold. Ever since the sealing of the border after the Indo-Chinese war, they had had to change their livelihood and lifestyle completely.

From far away came the sound of a procession, carried by the cold wind. Trumpets, deep, sonorous drumbeats and voices raised in chorus rang through the air. Chandi Prasad smiled, so the people from the Devi temple at Lata had arrived and were already getting everyone together.

A little ahead, a group of women squatted, cutting the long grass below the trees.

"*Ram Ram, Maaji*, coming for the meeting?"

Gaura Devi grunted in reply "*Chipko, Chipko* all the time. As though we women have time to attend meetings. We're busy with collecting water, fodder, fuel; leave alone cooking the food and toiling in the fields. You know its now time to get the land ready for sowing. Let the men come; attending an evening meeting at least cuts down on their drinking !"

A shout of laughter followed this statement, echoing in the threatened mountains.

Chandi Prasad trudged on, higher and higher, his heavy shoes letting loose mini-avalanches of pebbles. He knew that behind Gaura Devi's tough, joking words, was a determined woman, whose support he could count on if the need arose.

The words of the singing group wending its way up the mountain was even closer now.

'Bachao ! Bachao !

Save them from that terrible axe

The pine, the rhododendron, the oak

The gurgling spring, the running stream

The gentle wind, the pattering rain

Oh, save them all !

The hacking axe creates turmoil

Trees fall, soil silts, rivers overflow

The only answer now is - Chipko !

He smiled and moved on. The message was spreading. People in almost all the villages now knew of this strategy of hugging the trees to save them. Something had happened so far - a stirring within, if only now it would explode. If only isolated incidents would develop into a movement.

....

The local officials did not know how to react. The coming together of the hill peoples around the issue of *Chipko* was disturbing. Trees should not be cut for furniture or paper because of *Chipko*. Roads could not be built as they threatened the fragile ecology. Many of the development plans for the region were now being questioned. Should all development then come to a standstill because of *Chipko ?*

But the felling of trees in Reni had to be carried out. The money had already been paid three months ago, how could they not honour the contract now ? They needed a good plan to bypass a possible *Chipko* agitation at Reni, but in a way that no one would suspect. If only they could keep that trouble-maker Chandi Prasad Bhatt away from the village on that particular day. And do the same with the menfolk.

When the plan got underway it seemed much too easy, too simple. Why had no one thought of this earlier ?

The forest conservator of the Pauri Garhwal circle phoned Chandi Prasad Bhatt to say that he would visit the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal office in Gopeshwar on 25th March to see their activities in person. He hoped Chandi Prasad Bhatt would be present. Chandi Prasad Bhatt smelt a rat. He knew that cutting was planned for the same day.

It was during the visit of the officials on the 25th of March, that an urgent phone call was made to the DGSM office. Leaving the visitors to have tea and snacks, Chandi Prasad took the phone. The message was short and disturbing, 'All is lost.'

It was only through the phone call that Chandi Prasad realized that keeping him away from Reni was only half of the gameplan. On the very same day the menfolk of the village had all been called to Chamoli to be paid compensation for the lands they had lost to the Indian Army. Only the women remained in Reni, women who had laughed at Chandi Prasad's meeting in the village earlier in the week, scoffing at the very idea of *Chipko*.

Chandi Prasad returned to the officials shaken. It seemed as though there was no way the people could win. What would happen now ?

March 24, 1974

The little girl ran, her feet skimming the pine needle covered earth of the forest floor. Her breath came in short, hot gasps, her eyes were wide with fear. She had seen them, the men her mother and grandmother had warned her of, the men from the plains carrying saws and axes, coming to cut down her favourite trees.

She ran past the sole tall *deodar* tree, marked with strips of cloth and a vermillion *tikka*, that stood high above the others. She ran past the cement slab that stopped the hillside from crumbling even further. And as she ran Chandi Prasad's words from the meeting two nights ago, rang in her ears, "Before greening the forest, we must green the people. Those who do not have a voice must begin to shout."

"Mausi, Mausi," she gasped, tugging at the shawl of an elderly woman. "They have come".

Without a moment's hesitation Gaura Devi called out to her neighbours. "Bishan Divi, Pari Devi, come. Drop everything and come, our beloved forest is threatened. Go Sabli, go to Ganga Devi's home, tell her to join us we're taking the path through the forest."

Wiping her hands on her grimy saree, Pari Devi left the dough she was kneading and went along. Chandravati and Kamala left their cooking incomplete and swiftly followed the procession that Gaura Devi led with long strides.

Tall and erect she led them, talking all the time. And as she talked she turned to one or the other, binding them together into a force of strength.

Gaura Devi had become a widow while she was still a child. The long years of living alone, with neither father, husband or son to look after her, had made her strong, independent — even self-willed. It had also made her into the

informal leader of her community. A person you could turn to in your hour of need.

"Remember Chandi Prasadji had warned us of just this, two days ago," she said.

"That's why they called our menfolk to Chamoli today.....," said Bishan Devi.

"... to collect a compensation due 14 years ago!"

"This *bania* government is much too *chaalaak.*"

"But not as *chaalaak,* as us," came Pari Devi's rejoinder.

Soon they were out of the tiny village, and the slate-tiled roofs of the handful of houses, haphazardly grouped on a hillside, were left behind. The trees were close to each other and the dense foliage kept the pale sunlight out.

Gaura Devi recounted tales of her youth as they hastened along the pine-scented narrow path.

"When we were young, we would leave early every morning to collect fodder, walking down this very same path. We did not eat a single thing before we left home, because we knew the forest would provide. There were always edible berries and fruit to eat. If we were thirsty we would drink the cold sweet liquid that would collect at the *Banj* roots." A pause and a sigh, then she continued, "With the going of the trees, all this has gone too."

Their earth coloured clothes merged with the trees of the forest, camouflaging them from the group of labourers who were just beginning to set up camp.

Still panting from the steep climb, the women addressed the men in loud voices, interspersed with short, sharp gasps.

"*Bhula*, do not cut the forest."

"If it goes, the entire mountain will fall on our homes, and destroy our village completely."

"Then floods will come and sweep away our fields."

"We will be ruined."

"Please, stop."

The labourers were surprised on seeing the group of 21 women and seven children approaching them. They had taken every possible measure to avoid being seen. Not only had the contractor hired them from the adjoining state but he had also got them to remove their customary Himachali caps while travelling by public transport. As a further precaution he got them to close the tin windows of the bus they had travelled by.

The journey over these winding mountain roads had tired them. One or two had even opened a bottle of the local liquor on the way. Others lolled on the ground eating their food, watching the women warily. A strange silence enveloped the forest.

Shankarbabu broke the silence. He stumbled forward drunkenly, brandishing a gun and yelling, "Go away, you foolish low-caste women, or else the police will arrest you. We've paid good money to cut the trees, we have a permit. Go away."

The sight of the gun frightened some of the women but not Gaura Devi. She stood her ground, looked the drunkard straight in the eye and challenged him, "Shoot and only then can you cut this forest which is like a mother to us. It's herbs take care of our children when they are ill, it's roots build the earth and prevent the soil from slipping away, it's strong branches support our houses, our very lives ! Shoot, you coward !"

Her determined, powerful voice unnerved Shankarbabu. One of his friends came forward to pull him back into their midst. Somewhere a mountain crow cawed. The two sides waited, poised for action.

Pari Devi's gentle tone took over.

"There is no hurry. Finish your food and then come back to the village with us."

"Let our menfolk return from Chamoli, then you can settle things with them," Bishen Devi continued.

Some of the men began lifting their goods and moving down the path towards the river. The combination of Gaura Devi's rhetoric and the quiet words of Pari Devi and Bishan Devi had shamed them.

The women looked from one to the other. A quiet gesture from Gaura Devi prevented any of them from moving. The footfalls of the retreating men were the only sound in the tense atmosphere.

Shankarbabu's rasping voice rang out "We will also go back, but not on foot. We are rich, high-caste people. Bring a *palki* and carry us away from here, you low-caste women."

Bishan Devi and Pari Devi took their shawls off and made a hammock-like palanquin. They stooped to pick up one of the men who lay dead drunk sprawled on the forest floor. Embarrassed, he clambered to his feet and scuttled down the mountain path after his companions.

"Look ! There!" the little girl Sabli called out, pointing excitedly in the other direction "Some more men are coming."

Four labourers made their way down a slope, heavy sacks of rations slung on their backs.

"*Bhula,* please don't cut our trees. They are the only source of our sustenance. At least wait till tomorrow. Our men will return by then and you can discuss the issue further with them."

The battle of wits was soon over. The men carried on down the path. Realizing he was isolated, Shankarbabu followed them. The women were close behind, carrying the men's tools: pickaxes and shovels and crowbars.

Up ahead the path narrowed and a cement slab had been placed to fill a missing portion of the lane, that had been swept away in an earlier landslide. One side of the slab was wedged into the mountain,the other side overlooked the Rishi Ganga. Once this slab was removed, returning to the forest by the path was impossible.

The women knew the slab's strategic importance. A wordless signal went through the group, electrifying them. The seven women right at the back stopped, the distance between them and the single file of labourers ahead increasing with every minute.

Pari Devi quietly lifted the shovel of one of the labourers. Bishan Devi nodded, showing the crowbar she carried. They waited till the group disappeared around the corner and then they set to work furiously and with a sense of urgency.

They teamed up, some of them placing the crowbar below the cement slab and prising with all their might. Others hit the slab with whatever they had in their hands. Slowly the slab came loose, giving way before the strength of the women. Large chunks of it broke off and slid down the hillside, crashing through the undergrowth into the Rishi Ganga.

Now over half a kilometre ahead, the labourers stopped on hearing this loud sound. They immediately realized what had happened. The forest was now inaccessible to them. Gaura Devi stood at the back of the single file of people, a grim smile on her face, her hands on her hips, arms akimbo.

March 27, 1974

Chandi Prasad Bhatt stood anxiously waiting for the first bus from Joshimath that would take him to Reni. From a distance he could only hear the straining bus, making its way up the mountains. The mist was so heavy that it could not be seen. He wondered what had happened at Reni the previous day.

The first person to get off the bus was the forest guard from Reni. Chandi Prasad Bhatt greeted him, saying, "*Namaskar, bhaiya* we have not seen you in many days ... "

The guard turned on him and started shouting at the top of his voice, raining abuses on him and angrily waving his arms. Chandi Prasad quietly listened, knowing that if he reacted, the guard would start beating him.

The sound of another straining bus engine

distracted them. Weaving through wisps of mist, the second bus from Reni arrived.

As the bus pulled to a stop, another DGSM volunteer, Nautiyal stepped off with a jaunty step. His very first sentence was "All is well, everything went just fine."

Chandi Prasad could not believe his ears. For a moment he felt that some strange madness had affected all those who had come from Reni, first, the unnecessary anger of the forest guard, then the contrary statement of Nautiyal. Within minutes the mystery was cleared — the Reni forest had been saved without the loss of even single tree ! A triumph for the women of Reni !

The mist lifted and the forest embraced its people.

And so the story goes on...

Vedavalli Prakasan who had travelled a long way from Madras, was sitting at one of the tea shops at Gopeshwar. Cool, efficient and collected, she looked an impressive twenty-eight. It was mid-morning. Her rucksack rested against the table. She had spent half an hour trying to repair her camera. Suddenly she looked up and was taken by surprise. A group of young boys had collected around the shop and was watching her quietly. She smiled and took a picture of them. In minutes she was drying the print of her Polaroid film in the air, and soon showed the snapshot to the group. It was like magic! The village boys were excited and ran to show it to the others.

Valli picked up her kit and moved down the road. A few kids walked along with her. A young man who had been drinking tea had watched the scene. He got up and followed Valli and the kids.

"I am Birender Singh. I am a teacher at the Gopeshwar school" he said. "Where have you come from?".

"Madras," she paused and seeing his friendly face said, "I speak English and have also done a short course in Hindi."

"A good idea!...... Are you a mountaineer ?"

"No, I am a reporter."

"What made you come here ?"

"I am on holiday and have read a great deal about the *Chipko* story of this region and the message of the *Chipko* people. It's so fascinating, that I decided to come and collect first hand information."

"Do many people know about it ?" asked Birender.

"But of course! It is an internationally famous story. Over the years there has been extensive coverage in all newspapers. Cover stories in magazines appear every now and then and there are excellent programmes on TV. So, it is no surprise that we know so much about you people and your environment."

Birender's eyes shone with excitement. "What else do you know ?"

"We know about the many leaders and the DGSM. I have read about the great successes of the villagers, especially the women."

Birender suddenly interrupted her. "Do you know something? I am Shyama Devi's son."

Puzzled, Valli said, "I am sorry I do not recollect that name in all my reading."

"Oh ! Her name became famous after an incident that took place in 1975 when I was eight years old. She and the other women saved our oak trees."

Valli listened with interest. Birender was lost in thought as he recounted the story. *It was a spring morning in 1975 when Indira and Shyama Devi, went up to an officer's house. They stood at the gate and saw the beautiful garden with flowering creepers trailing around cut oak branches. Shocked by what they saw, they planned to meet the lady of the house in person and were sure that she would be understanding. In fact, Indira and Shyama felt they had a duty to save the oak trees. So, they walked in and gently knocked on the door. Dogs barked and a man in uniform opened the door and later the Memsahib came out. When Shyama Devi requested her not to use oak branches to decorate her garden, the lady would listen no more and shouted.*

"You dare say that! I am a senior officer's wife. Are you advising me ? Just go away."

Indira Devi tried to continue softly and explained that they needed the forest in order to survive. Without the trees there would be no food or fuel. Cattle fodder came from forest trees and they themselves needed the branches to build their meagre huts.

"Are you telling me that you can use the trees while I cannot? Leave immediately."

The Memsahib called the Chowkidar and asked him to send them away. Amazed at this outburst Shyama and Indira hurried back. Humiliated thus, tears of anger welled up in their eyes. When they returned to the village, the eager faces of the women who were waiting for them froze. They heard the story and decided on immediate action.

One of the older women said, "Call all the women. Come, let us go back to the Memsahib's house. Let us get all our wood back and pile it up at the Shiva temple. It will serve a better purpose there !"

The children went from door to door calling the women and older girls. In an hour scores of women had got together. They trooped up the hillside and tore open the gate of the others. The dogs barked but shied away as if afraid of their numbers. In twenty minutes the work was done. Every oak branch or log was loosened and carried away from the the lady's house and five other bungalows. The gardens were ravaged. The village women had retaliated....... This was followed a few months later by a large demonstration in Gopeshwar. Finally, the District Magistrate realized the seriousness of the situation and an apology was sent to the village women for the behaviour of the officers' wives.

The village women had won a major victory. They had been heard !

Valli, Birender and the group of kids were walking up a path between the hills. Birender had offered to take her around the village.

They skirted the hill. The sudden starkness of the scene hit the eye. The hill sides were treeless and desolate. Valli gasped. She turned away looking very sad. The innumerable pine stumps and dead trees told a very sad tale.

"Where are the forests, the pine trees ? This looks like a pine grave yard," Valli blurted out. "Birender, I have read about the *lisa* tapping in the pine forests and to me it seems like a prolonged and slow process of bleeding the trees to death."

"That's true ! Just a gash in the bark with a tin strip and the *lisa* trickles into tins that are placed below, sapping the vitality of the tree, while the men grow rich with the sale of the resin which for them is as valuable as liquid gold."

"But I don't understand. The magazine described a successful revolt, a victory for the villagers. It told of how a procession of slogan shouting volunteers had removed the blades and tin strips and had applied mud and gunny sacking to hundreds of wounds on the pine trees. The article stated that for months every tin strip that was replaced by the resin tappers, was removed by local men, women, children, and volunteers. Eventually, the Government had to relent and stop the *lisa* tapping. The villagers had succeeded. The article described it in no uncertain terms .... But, this ...... this mountain side has been devastated by man. I did not expect things to be so bad. I had thought that the problem was over."

Birender shook his head sadly. "Our trouble is that the destruction, often supported by the Horticulture department is vast, but the victories, though meaningful are small."

They were back on the main road. The bustle of the village traffic brought them back to reality - rickety buses creaked forward, loud horns tooted as villagers with pack-horses carrying their load, blocked the road near the bus stand. Valli suddenly realized that she had to make arrangements for her stay. She asked about hotel accommodation and Birender pointed down the road to the Azad Hotel.

Munching fruit and biscuits they walked on and reached the market place. They were about to cross over to the hotel when sounds of voices stopped them. A group of about ten young urchins had made a ring around something and were shouting vociferously. It sounded like a chant, the rhythmic verse rang through the air.

"What is it ? I cannot understand," Valli said.

Birender repeated, *"Do not cut us. Plant us. What is ours is yours."* .

Valli smiled. Children were the same everywhere. Birender stepped forward and parted the crowd. He found a young girl weeping bitterly and near her was a horse piled high with roughly cut logs and thin branches of a tree !

"My father, "she sobbed, "was taking this tree home. I promise, it was a fallen tree that we found near the little stream. My mother is very ill and my father said we could keep her warm for a month." Large tears trickled down her rough red cheeks.

Birender asked the boys, "Why have you been so nasty to this little girl ?"

"Look *Masterji*", one of the older boys said. "We have just come back from the Camp. All day long those women talk of saving trees and loving them, so we could not bear to see a tree that was chopped up and mutilated."

Birender understood their feelings. He had heard of the Eco-Camps to which mainly women went and had seen the effect they had on the women at home.

"I can understand what you are saying. The forests are our life and we should not cut them. But this little girl here, is NOT a contractor from the plains who will shave off our forests and leave the hills bare. She says that her father picked up a fallen tree."

The little urchins saw the point and ran down the winding road singing,

Plant us, decorate the earth
What is ours is yours.

Birender told the girl not to cry and asked where her father was. She wiped her nose and her eyes with the back of her hand and pointed to the village grocer's shop.

Valli had watched all and had taken some touching pictures.

"What camp did they talk of? All of you seemed to know," Valli asked.

"An Eco-Camp. These are run by the Dasoli Society, the DGSM."

"Yes, I understand. I have read about them. I have even seen Mr. Bhatt describe them on TV some years ago."

"These camps have become a regular feature and are very popular with the hill women. They come from far off villages to attend these short camps. They learn to work together to save themselves and their surroundings."

"There is one going on here," said Birender.

"Can't I join it ?" asked Valli.

Birender was taken aback. He had never expected this !

"Well, I will take you there. I should be able to manage to get you in."

Half a kilometre further, the camp site was alive with activity. It was the third day of the camp. Sixty women and ten men were participating. It was the women who had come forward in greater numbers. They saw the need for involvement and women, both young and old, seemed fired by an inner strength. They were determined to save their land and their forests. They revered them and would do all they could to revive them.

Two days of hard work over, every camp member looked busy and happy. The odd incident of the first day which had alarmed everybody, seemed a thing of the past.

Young Chameli had caused an upheaval, during the registration by bursting forth hysterically, "Why should I join the camp ? Why me ?" she had asked her friend in a loud whisper. "I know I am the only one from the household who is free to come, but I am NOT interested. I want to join my husband in Delhi. He says he'd like me to go there !"

Many had heard her and there had been a stunned silence while Chameli sobbed inconsolably.

"Chameli, calm down," her friend had said. But the girl had retorted, "should I wait to have grey hair before I can ask for anything for myself ? I will go to Delhi, even if I have to go alone."

The other participants had looked perturbed, but Durga Devi, one of the camp leaders, had understood. She had called Chameli aside and talked to her gently. The younger woman had sobbed and said that ever since her marriage, two years ago, she had seen nothing but work and had not been home to her parents. Durga's love and understanding had pacified her and Durga had explained to Chameli that there was no compulsion to attend the camp, and that she should join only if she were convinced and shared their ideals. .... Chameli had nodded her head innocently, blushing at her sudden resistance. .... Durga Devi had mused and wondered, how many trapped ambitions lay smothered within the hearts of these many women!

The sound of loud singing could be heard coming from the camp. Valli smiled as she recognised the chant that the urchins had

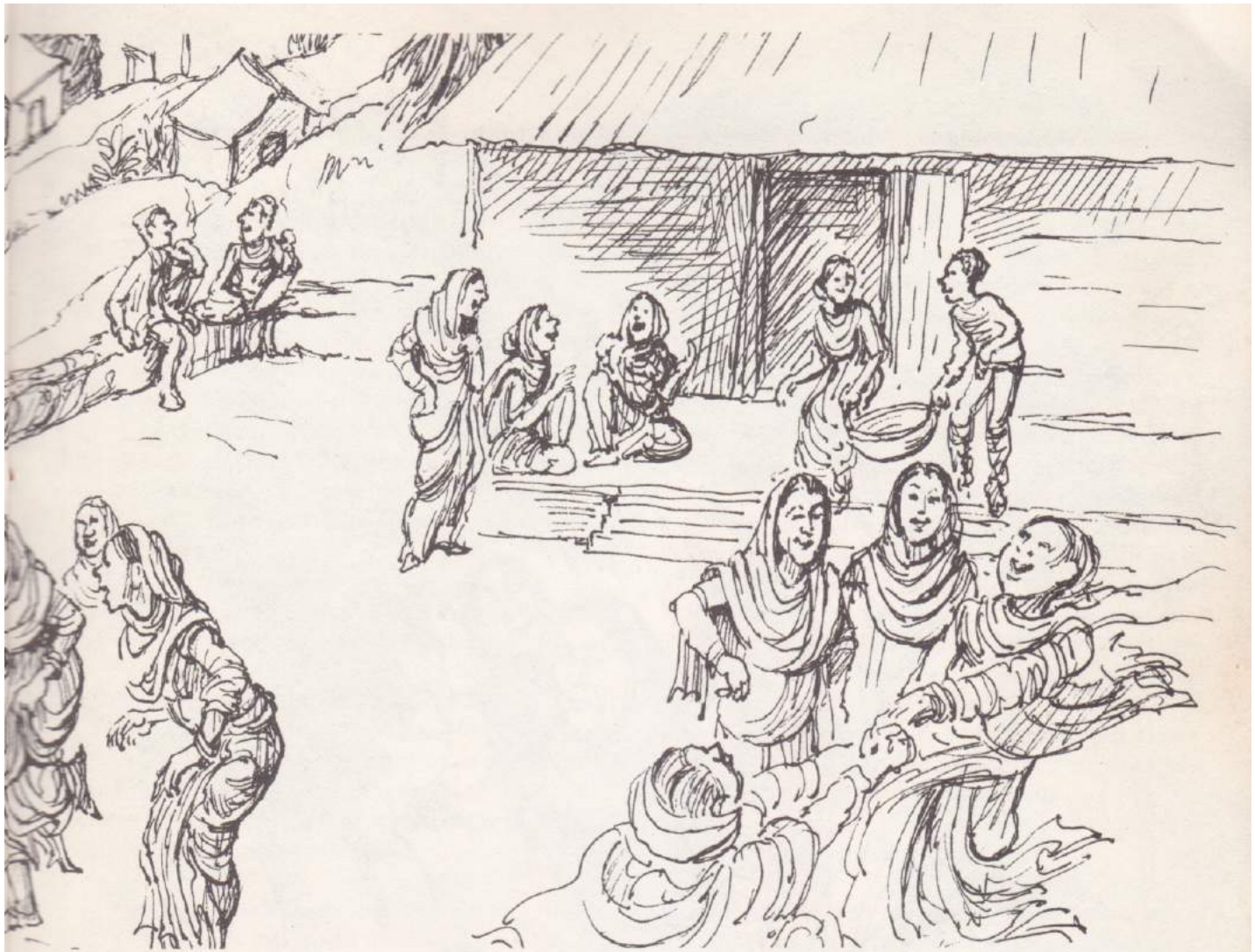
echoed. She noticed the fervour in the voices as the women sang. They waited for the session to finish and then they entered the camp office. Durga Devi and Chanda Devi were introduced to Valli. They were very pleased to hear that she was a reporter.

"Take our message to the whole world," Chanda Devi said emphatically. When Birender suggested that Vedavalli wished to join the camp, they agreed immediately.

After the tea break Chanda Devi led the way and as they came nearer the small building, voices could be heard. There were women's voices, shrill and insistent and sometimes angry male voices. Chanda put her finger on her lips and pointed to the back of the building. They entered the hall unnoticed and quietly sat down at the back of the group. The hall was packed. There were about seventy participants. The walls were stained and the ceiling grey. Yet, the fresh mountain air, and the chirping of the sparrows gave the place a quaint yet beautiful atmosphere. Valli had her pad and pen ready. A heated argument was in progress.

"The *Panchayat* has been approached by the Forest Department with a proposal for selective felling," said a determined male voice.

"Once again it is the same issue," a shrill but angry voice cut in. "Why cut the poor trees ? We won't allow it."

"But they say that they will cut only those trees that are over ninety years of age,"

Bir Singh added.

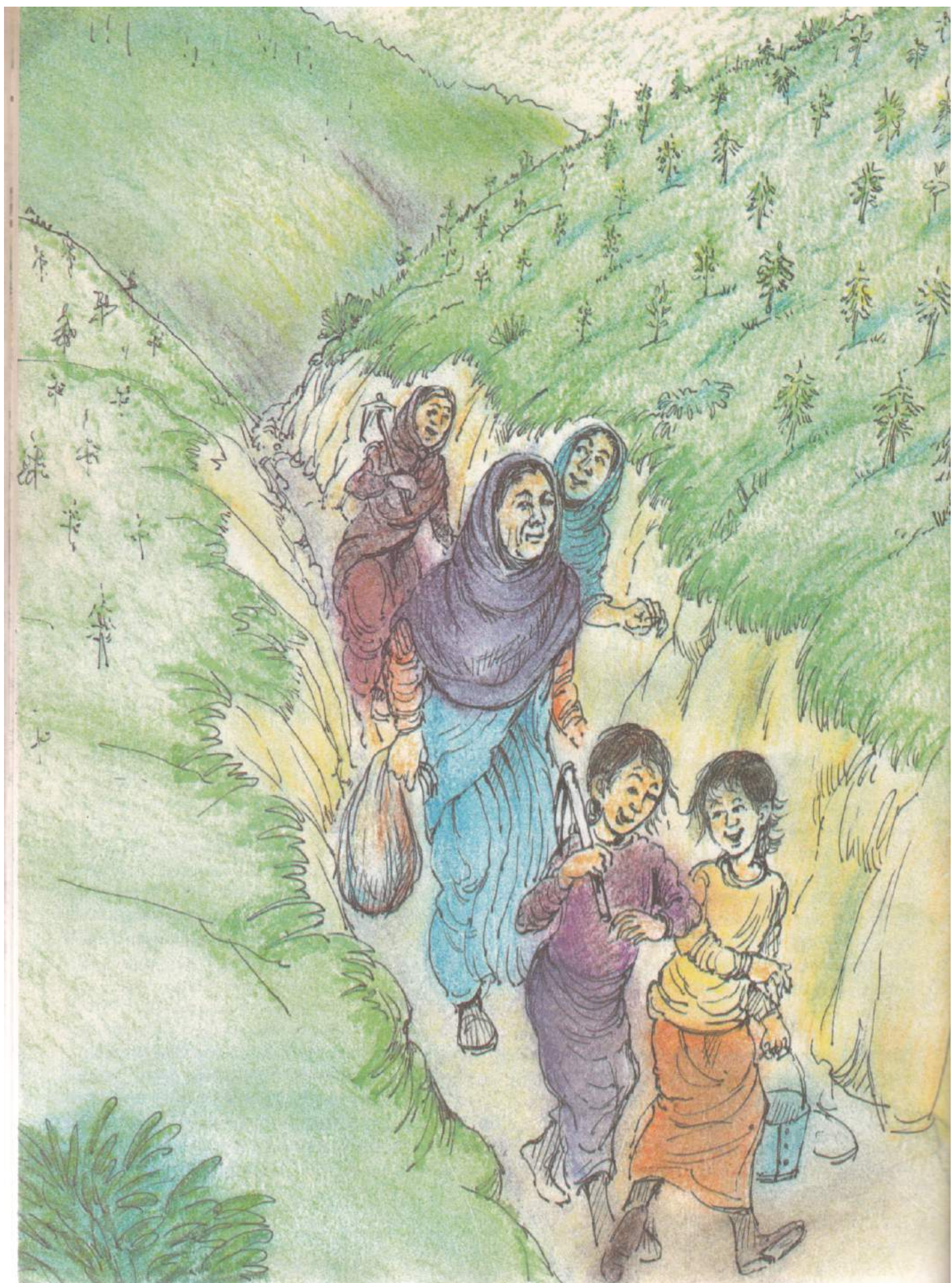
"We can never believe that. Bribes will be given and younger trees will be marked. It is of no use."

"Are we women fools that for the last three years and more we have continued to save the trees ? We are ready to give our lives for them. How can we allow any cutting ? We love our forests," shouted a woman.

"It is always the same," said an angry man. "Three years back you women came in the way of the Potato Seed Farm at Dungari-Paitholi. That was unforgivable. "

"The Government would have given excellent benefits in exchange - a motorable road and electricity. You could have travelled by bus instead of by pony and had lights in a dark village."

"A proper school for our children and a health centre," added Bir Singh. "You have not understood the need for these. You foolish women opposed all that development. Look at us today, poor, illiterate and totally out of date."

Suddenly Durga Devi clapped her hands demanding silence. She stood tall, slim and angry. "Listen to me ! Your roads would have given us no benefits. Instead the buses would have brought in greedy contractors and their wood cutters. Roads have made it easy for trucks to carry the loot away." The women laughed.

"Why don't you talk of re-planting the forests, why of cutting them?"

"If the forest goes, the land goes and next our rivers !" shouted another woman.

Champa stood up and said, "*Chacha*, don't you remember what we saw in Uttarkashi five years ago ? How can you forget ? In August 1978, at the height of the monsoons, when the Bhagirathi was swollen with rain water, the people of Uttarkashi noticed a very odd phenomenon. The mighty Bhagirathi was receding ! The river was slowing down at an alarming rate."

"These are lies. Stop it !" shouted Bharath. "What are you telling them?"

"You were too young," said Champa Devi. "Yes. Around midnight on that day a whole mountain top three kilometres by one kilometer had crashed fifty kilometres upstream from Uttarkashi. A hundred metre high wall had suddenly risen across the river."

Young Bharath got up angrily but Gopal Singh waved to him to sit down.

"The water formed a four kilometres lake behind this wall of rubble. It held out for thirteen hours and then the water broke through and flooded villages and towns for a distance of seventy kilometres."

After a pause, Champa Devi challenged "Why did the mountain side fall down? How can we ever forget this Gopal Chacha?"

Gopal nodded quietly. His face was sad. He knew that Champa had told the truth.

"My brother-in-law is in the army" said another woman, "He told us that in 1977 in Pithoragarh fifteen soldiers, thirty villagers and seventy six heads of cattle had succumbed to a landslide. Why? What causes these landslides? Where are the old forests of oak and *deodar*? How can you talk of felling trees? Do something to save them instead."

Chameli had been listening to all this. She was tense with emotion and anger stirred up within her. She stood in the middle of the crowd of women flushed and excited.

"And Bhyunder ?" she said, "Why has not anyone mentioned those forests ? My mother told us the story so many times that it is ingrained in my memory. I remember her saying that the men of Bhyunder had refused to cut the trees and so the Forest Department had given the contract to men of another village. They needed to supply wood to the twenty five thousand pilgrims that would go to Badrinath. The wood cutters had come in secretly one day. Somehow the women had come to know about this move and had stolen the axes of the labourers. The women had challenged these men and had said they would return the axes only if the men agreed to go away leaving the forests untouched. These women had saved the forests in the Chamoli Himalayas."

When Chameli sat down, there was a buzz of conversation. The men had no answer and finally agreed to join the women in their campaign to save their land by re-planting the forests.

Soon the meeting came to an end. Once more, the women had won. Groups of people came into the courtyard.

"It is different when you are actually there," said Valli. "The women look gentle and weary. Their rough hands and wrinkled faces reflect their tough lives. They seem shy and quiet. But they are determined and strong. They seem to have decided to win."

They went out to enjoy the short break. Indira Devi broke into laughter and pointed out to the young women. "Each of them has two or three children. Look at them playing like little girls." In the corner Sita and Lakshmi criss-

crossed their hands and were spinning around playing *guguthi*. A group of women stood around and clapped.

"Delightful," said Durga Devi. "They experience nothing but pain and hardwork at home. They are bold girls, God bless them !"

It was time for lunch and as the young women were relaxing, the older once were busy giving finishing touches to the afternoon meal. .... Valli was enjoying herself and was glad that she had chosen to stay on at the camp. She joined the older women who were cooking busily in the corner. She sat among them and picked up some dough and rolled it into a neat ball. The women laughed at her because, in jeans she could not squat like them but sat on her haunches. She picked up a rolling pin and the women crowded around to see what she would do. She deftly rolled out the dough to produce a perfect round *roti*.

"There," she mumbled to herself, "I can make *rotis* too. After all, I make *dosas* and *puran poalis* at home."

Quietly and efficiently, the older women served lunch to the large group. There was *dal*, *sag* and *rotis* . The meal was simple and was over soon. Once again the eager participants were ready for work.

It was mid-afternoon and slowly rows of women and the few men walked out into the forests. They climbed in single file each with a basket, a sickle and a young sapling or two. A few carried buckets, shovels and pick axes. The procession wound its way up to a pitted hill side, made ready for the saplings. By the end of the day the hill side would have a cover of green. While some were busy planting, others collected twigs and branches to build fires to keep them warm. A few collected bagfuls of green vegetables for the evening meal.

As the crowd trickled out Durga and Champa planned the next morning's work.

Valli picked up her video camera, her still camera and the telescopic lenses. She nonchalantly followed the groups. Chanda Devi's words rang in her ears. "Take our story to the whole world!" That, she would certainly do.

Valli had a wonderful day and managed to capture a number of scenes. Old landslides, dried up rivulets, dark patches of forest charred by forest fires, vast treeless areas, women with cattle, women with twigs, and women with shovels. There in front of her was a group of women emerged from a thorny patch in the forest. Their skin looked scratched, yet they steadily collected dry twigs for the fire.

Luckily, this was the second monsoon camp and the women did not have to carry water for every young tree. Some participants were weeding the last year's plantation and on the whole doing everything to revive and rejuvenate the torn, bare mountain sides.

As each group completed its work, the men and women waited for the others to finish. Suddenly one of the women started singing. One by one, those who were waiting joined in. A few women got up and formed a circle. They danced with slow rhythmic steps. It was a splendid sight, their maroon, brown and black clothes merging with the twilight scene. The men got up too and linking their hands behind each other's waists formed a semi-circle.

Valli stepped back silently, rested her video camera on her shoulder and from a distance covered the scene.

She sat down against a tree and relaxed. She was immersed in the slow, sinuous formations of the dance, when the backdrop of the scene took her by surprise.

Was her memory slipping ? Wasn't this the brown slope that she had captured in a photograph earlier that afternoon ? How had it acquired these patches of green? How and when?......... She then remembered that each

member had carried a sapling — some oak, some *deodar* and pine, while others had chosen fuel, fodder or fruit trees. While she had been busy taking photographs and video films, each one must have planted a tree.

Snatches of lines from reports in her own Madras-based newspaper came to her mind: *'Afforestation begins in the Himalayas', 'The mountains regain their tree-cover' and 'New forests will help the Himalayas to survive'.* She smiled. Such effort could not but be positive.

The brilliant sun was dipping behind the western hills. The participants ran down the slopes with the deftness of mountain goats. Valli got up, stretched blissfully, packed her equipment and turned to go back. But there in the distance something caught her eye. Six green grassy mounds had suddenly appeared on the hill side. She shook herself to make sure that she was awake.... She was sure that they had not been there earlier. But what was worse was that they seemed to be moving forward slowly. Seeing her consternation, some women had stopped. They laughed and pointed to the mounds and three of them bent forward with their arms at the back. "We do this every day, we have the cattle to feed." Valli looked again and saw the bent pairs of legs and hidden faces peering from under the grass. She roared with laughter but said, "Those poor backs ! The bundles of grass look heavy." She clicked a still of the scene. She zoomed in on faces, expressions and hands. She realised that these innocent women worked so hard. They looked so weary and seemed to suffer silently.

Chameli found herself walking next to Valli.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself amongst us," she said.

Valli nodded and smiled.

"Are you married? Don't you have a husband you want to be with ?"

Valli looked up, surprised! She could see that the question had been innocent.

"Yes, I have. My husband Raman works in an engineering firm. He builds bridges and is away at site for months at a time."

Chameli looked very interested. "When did you see him last ?"

"Two months ago. Yes, I would love to be with my husband but can't."

Chameli went on, "My husband works in a Government office in Delhi. He comes home a few times a year."

They walked on in silence and then Chameli asked, "What made you join this camp?"

"I read about the movement and decided to write about all of you. I write for the newspapers and I came because I wanted to experience things myself."

"And now that you are here, how do you feel ? Do you think all this work is of any use ?"

"Yes! Your people have shown the world that with cooperation and grit, all problems can be solved by the people themselves. I think it has been the most wonderful experience of my life."

....

And so, the story goes on. Many more camps, many more women and men go on with their effort of reviving the splendour of the Himalayas.

Organizations like Mahila Mangal Dals for women, Daliyon ka Dagadia (Friends of Trees) *for youth, and others have done remarkable work ! The movement has spread far and wide.*

When will this work be completed?

The task is immense and may take many more decades. But, what is important, is that the people have recognized their role in the survival of the Himalayas.

GLOSSARY OF HINDI WORLDS USED IN THE STORY

angan	courtyard
angrezi	British
arre beti	oh daughter
bachao!	help!
bachchon	children
bania	trader
Banj	Indian oak
bhai, bhaiya, bhula	brother
bidees	country-made cigarettes with thin tabacco leaf as outer cover.
bori	jute sack
botiyas	hill tribe-inhabitants of Indo-Tibet border areas
chaalaak	clever
chacha	uncle
chalo	go
chaukidar	watchman
chipko	hug / embrace
dafter	office
daku	dacoit
dal	pulse
deodars	evergreen coniferous tree
dosa	salted pancake
ghadas	clay pots / round pitchers for storing water
guguthi	game played by girls holding hands in a crisscross and spinning around
jhola	cloth bag with shoulder sling
ji	a suffix used after a name for elders as mark of respect
jindabad	long live! (slogan said in loud voices during a march)
kurta	long knee-length garment with full sleeves normally cover with a pyjama
Kyon bhai sahib?	Why sir?
Ma, ma, kahan ho?	mother, mother... where are you?
maaji	mother. also used as a form of addressing elderly women
mandal	group/ organization
mandua	coarse grain
mausi	maternal aunt
memsahib	madam
mooch	moustache
moochawala	man with moustache
namaskar	Namaste – an Indian greeting accompanied with folded hands
nani	maternal grandmother
Paapi pet ka sawaal hai	"A question of earning a living" (phrase)
pahadi	a native of the hill districts of northern India
palki	palanquin
panchayat	A powerful village committee
poochho mat beti	"Don't ask, daughter" (phrase)
puran poali	sweet, stuffed 'roti'
Ram Ram	greetings
rishvat	bribe
roti	round flat Indian bread
sag	green leafy vegtable
samosas	an Indian snack
sardar	chief (colloquial term used to denote Sikhs)
sarkar	government
sarkari	official
sathiyon	friends
Shiva	important Hindu God
tikka	sacred mark
lisa	resin